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SOME LINGERING MISCONCEPTIONS OF INSTRUMENTALISM¹

WE are all agreed, I take it, that cooperation in philosophy does not require that we be all of one mind, any more than cooperation in other matters requires that we be all of one vocation. However, in philosophy as elsewhere, if great waste is to be avoided, there must be as much mutual understanding as possible. What I have to say aims to promote such cooperative understanding by attempting to clear up some lingering misconceptions of instrumentalism.

I must confess that I have used the term "lingering" with malice aforethought, fully aware of the fact that if anything is said to be "lingering" we understand it is staying overtime. Indeed, a year ago I should have said what perhaps some of you may still say when I have finished, that this discussion is another sad instance of belated industry. I should have said that if the misconceptions to be discussed still "lingered" it was only in a few unlighted by-ways and corners; that in all quarters that really counted instrumentalism had lived down these misconceptions even as it had survived its early reputation of "subjectivism." But during the past year a revival of these misconstructions has appeared in such high places, that any complacency that instrumentalism may have begun to feel over the supposition that it had at last outlived the rumors of its alleged youthful indiscretions, has been rudely shaken, and it finds itself obliged to enter upon a "drive" of refutation.

My present interest in this revival was first aroused by a lecture on science and pragmatism by my good friend Professor Fite, in which to my great astonishment he affirmed the major premise of instrumentalism to be that all *consciousness* is instrumental to merely physical behavior, a doctrine which easily lends itself to many variations of the *reductio ad absurdum* refutation, of which you may be sure Professor Fite was not slow to take full advantage to the great entertainment of his audience. He had no difficulty in showing that such a doctrine makes all conscious experience valuable in proportion as it is instrumental to a process that is wholly without value; *i. e.*, the instrumental theory exhibits consciousness as possessed of a chronic suicidal mania.

At the close of the lecture I entered a protest to the effect that instrumentalism is not a doctrine of the instrumental character of consciousness as such, but of *reflective*, logical, inferential conscious-

¹ Read at the annual meeting of the Western Philosophical Association, April, 1920.

ness, and that this instrumental character belonged, therefore, to a very limited and specific phase of conscious experience. In support of this I referred to the numerous explicit statements of Dewey, who I assume is generally accepted as the most authoritative expounder of instrumentalism. Over and over Dewey reiterates that what reflective thinking is instrumental *to*, is the resolution of the conflicts of immediate experience and its consequent development and enrichment. And "immediate" experience here includes the whole of non-reflective, non-inferential experience. He frequently generalizes this as a world of "action and appreciation." Note the term "appreciation." But as if to guard against any possible misunderstanding, he often specifies such things as "going to business," "greeting a friend," "contemplation of a sunset, a painting, watching a play, reading a poem, *etc.*" How in the name of common speech should such things as these be confused with merely physical behavior?

Similarly, in Professor Adams's treatment of instrumentalism and values¹ his constant complaint is that in instrumentalism there is no place for the non-instrumental values or objects of contemplation, adoration, love and worship; that in instrumentalism not only reflective thought, but all *values* are instrumental to merely vital processes of the organism. Again, I submit that this is not merely an exaggeration, but a complete subversion of the instrumental doctrine of values. Not only is there room in instrumentalism for these non-instrumental values, but they have *most* of the room, since they occupy it all except the value of inferential operations whose main business it is to keep these non-instrumental values going. So far as I can see, there is no reason whatever why any one who is temperamentally contemplative and appreciative may not be a perfectly good instrumentalist, provided he recognize that the course of contemplation and true love is not *always* smooth, and that it is the function of analytic reflection to make smooth the paths of contemplation and affection.

It is not difficult to discern some of the sources of these misconceptions. Among the more superficial is the term "instrumentalism" itself. As it has turned out, it seems unfortunate that the instrumental theory of knowledge and logic became an "ism," for an ism is supposed to state a universal character. Now, I do not wish to imply that the instrumental theory of knowledge does not carry with it an interpretation of other things than knowledge, and if any one pleases, he can call this interpretation "metaphysics."

¹ Cf. *Idealism and the Modern Age*, a stimulating volume by George Plimpton Adams.

But it scarcely follows without more ado that because something, for example knowledge, is held to be instrumental, that something else, for example values, must also be instrumental. On the contrary, when it is said that reflective thinking is "instrumental" there surely is some presumption that what it is instrumental *to* is not itself instrumental. The term "immediate experience," of course, makes this presumption explicit. But this only makes it the more ironical that a philosophy in which immediate experience is so fundamental should bear the name "instrumentalism."

But a more indigenous and prolific source of these misconceptions is the habit which all of us have more or less of thinking and talking of consciousness in cognitive terms. Hence, when knowing is proclaimed to be instrumental, it is very easy to slip over to the assumption that this carries the whole of consciousness with it. The basis of this habit is not difficult to see. It lies in the fact that so much of the weal and woe of the rest of conscious experience turns on the success and failures of knowing. Hence, the importance of the technique of knowing; hence, the fact that it is the focus of most of the discussions of consciousness. It is the part of consciousness that has a technique that can be discussed and reconstructed.

Again, there can be no doubt that the notion that reflective consciousness is instrumental to merely physical behavior has found aid and comfort in the frequent appeals of instrumentalists to biology. This is very obvious in the discussions of Fite and Adams. The key to the misunderstanding growing out of this appeal to biology, lies in the fact that those who find this appeal a stumbling block always assume that the biology to which instrumentalism refers is biology as it has long been conceived when stripped of all conscious and social characters—the biology that has constituted historic "naturalism" which has always evoked a correlative supernaturalism as its answer. But just a modicum of attention, in reading these references to biology, should have made it clear that the biology to which instrumentalists so often refer is a transfigured and glorified biology, loaded with all the conscious and social values which are denied to it by those who find it such a bugbear. Of course, if one first carefully removes all conscious and social character from nature, it requires no very daring inference to conjecture that they must be looked for elsewhere.

Of a piece with the misconstruction of instrumentalism's doctrine of biology and nature are the misunderstandings of its conceptions of conduct and behavior. Now there certainly has been considerable ambiguity in the use of these terms. Sometimes reflection is made instrumental *to* conduct or behavior, in which case

conduct and behavior obviously mean simply non-reflective experience, including as much appreciation and contemplation as you like. At other times, reflection is made instrumental *in* conduct and behavior. Here these terms are used in a very broad sense, akin to "the conduct of life." Yet again, reflection is spoken of as a *part* of conduct, conduct being explicitly defined as the process of reconstructing and developing conflicting values. Conduct here means the whole mediating process.—But in none of these cases does conduct or behavior mean mere motion. A part of the time, indeed, Professor Adams does concede that in instrumental logic reflective thought is instrumental to something more than a merely physiological process—namely to the satisfaction of desires. But these desires are at once limited to the expression of instinctive needs of the body determined entirely by its past history. Reflection is thus tied to the past. It can be only a memory of the movements involved in satisfying fixed instinctive needs. Elsewhere, to be sure, when contrasting instrumental interests with the values of "possession, contemplation, and worship," instrumentalism is portrayed as a lusty and rather impious philosophic Bolshevik devoid of all reverence for the past, having for its motto "Accept no world presented to you as something to possess and contemplate and worship. Make your own world; live only in a world you create or control."

In protesting these misconceptions, not to say caricatures, of instrumentalism, I do not wish to leave the impression that no real issue remains. So long as there are those who hold that reflection and truth are wholly self-contained and in nature independent of and irrelevant to the world of social, esthetic and religious values, there will be an issue. This issue is at bottom, I think, the issue between formal thought and truth and material, *i. e.*, applied thought and truth. A wholly autonomous thought and truth must in the end be formal. This is why those who cling to this view lean so heavily on formal mathematics.

This statement of the issue suggests yet another and the last of the sources of misunderstanding to be considered. This is to be found in the confusion of the issue between formal and instrumental thought and truth with the psychological question of division and specialization of interest. So far as I can see, the fact that an individual or a number of individuals may take special interest in the problem of the technique of thinking, or the supposition that all thinking has its own immediate value does not affect in the least the theory of instrumental logic. Let one be a hopelessly besotted intellectualist, let him say that "nothing can possibly be conceived in the world or out of it which is so good as a good thought," and let

him believe that the sole justification of the whole furniture of earth and choir of heaven is that they furnish material and occasions for thought—still if he find that some thinking is good and some bad, and if in separating the good from the bad he is obliged to appeal to results in the rest of the world, he would still be an instrumentalist in good standing. The issue of instrumental or non-instrumental thinking is not the question whether any or all of us believe thinking to be the greatest thing in the world—it is simply a question of what thinking is and does in the world, and how it gets its character of truth and falsity, wherever it occurs, and however much a matter of specialized personal interest it may be.

One who makes wheels for automobiles (I assume the time-honored watch wheels are now out of date as illustrations) may come to feel about wheels as James's hen about the eggs, that wheels are the most utterly fascinating and precious, and never-too-much-to-be-turned-out things in the world. But if he distinguishes between *good* and *bad wheels* and finds that he makes this distinction on the basis of their relations to automobiles, or watches, or wagons, he will still qualify as an instrumentalist. If, however, his enthusiasm for wheels takes the form of contemplation and adoration of the celestial essence of circularity, then of course, we are in the realm of immediate non-instrumental values, but note that we are also beyond truth and error and goodness and badness. As for the goodness, or badness, truth or falsity of the particular *instances* of circularity, how as objects of contemplation merely can they be good or bad, true or false? They are simply circles or not circles. Indeed, as a matter of contemplative value, why bother with the "instances" after we have reached the point where we can focus the mind's eye on the subsistential essences? But, if, empirically, one finds, that the maintenance and renewal of the contemplation and adoration of the essence of circularity depend on experiences of particular instances, and if he finds that the discovery and production of these instances are somewhat of a *problem* requiring conduct and behavior which involves the operations of reflection, then he is again face to face with an instrumental logic. But whether we happen to be more interested in the values of contemplation or appreciation or in the processes by which they are sustained, developed and enriched, is irrelevant to the nature of the instrumental function of reflective thinking.

Finally, the instrumental character of reflection is not adequately conceived if it be thought of merely in the policeman's rôle of quelling conflicts among our contemplative and appreciative values by suppressing some and giving others free course. In every thoughtful settlement of such conflict there is a revision and recon-

struction of those values which is genuinely *creative*. And “*this function of reflection*”—says Dewey—“is incomparably more valuable for living a life than is the primary result of *control*, essential as that is, for having a life to live.”

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THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE PREDICATE

AN interesting feature of Professor Toohey's *Elementary Handbook of Logic* is his polemic against the doctrine of the distribution of the predicate. Professor Toohey finds the explanation of conversion and of the categorical syllogism “much easier and simpler if this hypothesis is discarded” (p. 30). The “assumption,” he contends, is “unnecessary.” The rule of distribution is not needed for the explanation of conversion (p. 45). Moreover, “the doctrine of the distribution of the predicate is based upon a confusion of judgment with the mind's subjective reflection upon it, that is, upon a confusion of the *meaning* or *import* of a proposition with its *implication*” (p. 202). “Many logicians condemn Hamilton for saying that the extension of the predicate is present to the mind, while they themselves [in defining distribution] maintain that the mind refers to the extension of the predicate” (p. 203). “But there is another objection to the hypothesis of the distribution of the predicate, and that is that it breaks down. The partial inverse of ‘All *S* is *P*’ is ‘Some non-*S* is not *P*.’ Since conversion and obversion are legitimate processes, this partial inverse is a valid conclusion. But according to the foregoing hypothesis, there is a distributed term (*P*) in the partial inverse which was not distributed in the original proposition, and hence the partial inverse is invalid” (p. 206).

The objection to the doctrine of distribution is then two-fold. In the first place it is said to be of little or no value pedagogically; and in the second place it is said to involve us in contradiction. It is the latter contention in which I am chiefly interested at this time.

It must be conceded, I think, that the difficulties alleged by Professor Toohey are not wholly factitious. Yet these difficulties do not seem to me to inhere in the concept of distribution itself, but rather to result from the inadequacy of the conventional definition. And the following formulation is suggested in the hope that it may enable us to avoid the pitfalls to which Professor Toohey has directed our attention:

A term is distributed with respect to another term when by re-